

Lenin, Speech to Adult Education Directors, 1920

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Speech at the Third All-Russia Conference of Directors of Adult Education Divisions of Gubernia Education Departments

February 25, 1920

Permit me to greet your conference on behalf of the Council of People's Commissars and to share a few ideas with you.

As far as the international situation is concerned, I can tell you of a wireless message received today from Britain which better than anything else typifies it. The message says that yesterday, the twenty-fourth, the Allied Council decided that in the event of the states bordering on Russia asking its advice on policy it would say that it could not advise a war that would probably injure their interests, still less could it advise an aggressive war against Russia; if, however, the Russian Soviet Republic attacked their legitimate frontiers, the Allied Council would give them its support. The Allied gentlemen also want to send to Russia a commission that belongs to the Washington labour committee. The organisers of the conference, social-traitors headed by Albert Thomas, have agreed on certain social reforms and want to send this crowd, which constitutes part of the League of Nations, to Russia to investigate how far conditions in Russia coincide with the normal requirements of "civilised" states.

The report of yesterday's decision by the Allies shows clearly enough that those gentlemen have got themselves into a mess, and also what benefit we can gain from that mess. They have wasted hundreds of millions (the British Government has) on support for the war and have now announced that they can no longer support it. Their offensive spirit is played out, although they are still delivering war

materiel to Poland; they are still delivering armaments and we have authentic information that Poland is regrouping her forces for an offensive so that we cannot place any great reliance on their announcement. A certain threat still remains, although the external danger from the Allies has diminished by ninety per cent; we shall have to retain our military preparedness after the end of the war against Denikin; we cannot count on full demobilisation.

Nine-tenths of the danger of an attack on Russia by international capitalism has, therefore, disappeared; they have suffered such a thorough collapse that are proposing for the umpteenth time to send a commission to Russia. If that commission is to consist of gentlemen like Albert Thomas, who visited Russia during the war, it will end in nothing but a scandal for them and will be an excellent basis for agitation for us. We'll give them such a welcome that they will leave Russia as quickly as possible and the only gain will be agitation for the workers of other countries. They want to scare us, but when we say we are welcoming them as honoured guests, they will hide this attempt of theirs. That shows the extent to which they are dismayed. We now have a window open on to Europe, thanks to the peace with Estonia, and are able to obtain the basic goods from there. There is, indeed, tremendous progress and improvement in our international situation; nine-tenths of all external danger to the Soviet Republic has been removed.

The more the danger is removed the more shall we be able to get on with our peaceful development, and we expect a lot from you and from your activities in the sphere of adult education. A number of material changes are necessary to put education in schools on a better footing-schools must be built, teachers selected and internal reforms carried out in organising and in selecting the staff. These are all things that require lengthy preparation. You are not hampered by this lengthy preparation in adult education. The demand of the people for an education outside the regular school system and the need for workers in this field are increasing very greatly. We are sure that with the common aid and by our common efforts more will be done than has hitherto been the case.

In conclusion I shall speak about the nature of adult education, which is connected with propaganda and agitation. One of the fundamental faults of education in the capitalist world was its alienation from the basic task of organising labour, since the capitalist had to train and educate obedient and disciplined workers. There was no connection in capitalist society between the actual tasks of the organisation of social labour and teaching. There was dead, scholastic, routine teaching befouled by the influence of the clergy which everywhere, even in the most democratic republics, functioned in such a way that everything fresh and healthy was compelled to withdraw. Direct, vital work was made difficult because no extensive education was possible without a state apparatus and without material and

financial aid. Since we can and must prepare to transfer our entire Soviet life from the path of military training and defence to that of peaceful development it is essential for you, workers in the field of adult education, to take this change into consideration, and your propaganda work, its aims and programme should be made to fit this change.

To show you how I understand the tasks and the entire character of education, of teaching, training and upbringing, in their connection with the changing tasks of the Soviet Republic, I would remind you of the resolution on electrification that was adopted at the last session of the All-Russia Central Executive Committee; you are probably all familiar with it. A few days ago there was an announcement in the papers that within two months (in the official printed report it said two weeks, but that was a mistake)—that within two months a plan for the electrification of the country would be elaborated to cover a minimum period of two to three years and a maximum period of ten years. The character of all our propaganda, which includes purely Party propaganda, and school teaching, and adult education, must change, not in the sense that the fundamentals and general direction of teaching should be changed, but in the sense that the character of the work must be adapted to the transition to peaceful development with an extensive plan for the industrial and economic reconstruction of the country, because the general economic difficulty and the general task is the rehabilitation of the country's economic forces so that the proletarian revolution can create the new foundations of economic life side by side with petty peasant economy. Up to now the peasant has been compelled to loan grain to the workers' state; the pieces of coloured paper called money received in return for grain do not satisfy the peasant. The peasant, being dissatisfied, is demanding his legitimate rights—in exchange for grain he wants the industrial goods that we cannot give him until we have rehabilitated the economy. Rehabilitation—that is the basic task, but we cannot rehabilitate on the old economic and technical basis. This is technically impossible and would be absurd; we have to find a new basis. This new basis is our electrification plan.

We are talking to the peasants, to the mass of less—developed people, showing them that the new transition to a higher stage of culture and technical education is necessary for the success of all Soviet development. And so, it is essential to restore the economy. The most ignorant peasant will understand that the economy has been wrecked by the war and that he cannot overcome poverty and obtain the necessary goods in exchange for grain unless we restore it. All our work in the sphere of propaganda, school and adult education must be linked up closely with this most immediate and urgent need of the peasant in order not to be isolated from the most urgent requirements of our daily life; it should present them and their development in a way the peasant understands; it must be stressed that the way out of the situation is only through the rehabilitation of industry. Industry,

however, cannot be rehabilitated on the old basis; it must be rehabilitated on the basis of modern technology, which means the electrification of industry and a higher culture. Electrification takes up to ten years' work, but it is work at a higher cultural and political level.

We shall evolve an extensive plan of work which must, in the minds of the peasantry, have a clearly defined practical aim. This cannot be done in a few months. The minimum programme should cover no less than three years. Without lapsing into utopias we may say that in ten years we shall be able to cover all Russia with a network of power stations and go over to an industry based on electricity that will meet the requirements of modern technology and put an end to the old peasant farming. This, however, requires a higher level of education and culture.

Without hiding from ourselves the fact that the immediate practical task is the restoration of transport and the delivery of food, and that with productivity at its present level we cannot undertake any extensive activities, you must nevertheless keep in mind and carry out, in the sphere of propaganda and education, the task of full rehabilitation on a basis commensurate with cultural and technical requirements. The old methods of propaganda are outmoded and until recently approached the peasants with general phrases about the class struggle; they served as grounds for the invention of all sorts of nonsense about proletarian culture,[1] etc., but we shall very rapidly cure ourselves of all this nonsense which seems very much like an infantile disorder. In propaganda and agitation, and in school and adult education, we shall present the question in a more sober and business-like manner, a manner worthy of the people of Soviet power who have learned something in the course of two years and who will go to the peasants with a practical, businesslike and clearcut plan for the reconstruction of all industry and will demonstrate that with education at its present level the peasant and the worker will not be able to carry out this task and will not escape from filth, poverty, typhus and disease. This practical task is clearly connected with cultural and educational improvements and must serve as the central point around which we must group all our Party propaganda and activities, all our school and extra-mural teaching. This will help to get a sound grasp of the most urgent interests of the peasant masses and will link up the general improvement in culture and knowledge with burning economic requirements to such an extent that we shall increase a hundredfold the demand of the working-class masses for education. We are absolutely certain that if we have solved the difficult war problem in two years, we shall solve a still more difficult problem—the cultural and educational problem—in five to ten years.

These are the ideas I wished to express to you. (*Applause.*)

Endnotes

[1] Lenin here refers to Proletcult (Proletarian Culture Organisation) formed in September 1917 as an independent workers' cultural and educational organisation. After the October Revolution A. A. Bogdanov and other leaders of the Proletcult continued to uphold its “independence” and thus counterposed it to the interests of the proletarian state. As a result, bourgeois intellectuals made their way into the organisation and began to influence it. The Proletcult members practically rejected the cultural legacy of previous generations, strove to cut themselves off from mass cultural and educational work isolated themselves from life and advocated the need to create a special “proletarian culture” by “laboratory methods”. Bogdanov, the main ideologist of the Proletcult, recognised Marxism in words, but actually advocated subjective idealism and Machism. The Proletcult was not a homogeneous organisation. Besides bourgeois intellectuals who made up the leadership of many of its organisations, there was also working youth who sincerely wanted to help the cultural development of the Soviet state. The Proletcult organisations made progress in 1919, but in the early twenties they went into decline. In 1932 the Proletcult ceased to exist.

Lenin sharply criticised its erroneous principles in a draft resolution on “Proletarian Culture” (see present edition, Vol. 31, “On Proletarian Culture”) and in a number of other works.

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Course: Development, Rural and Urban

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